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Author(s): Katharine A. Carl

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A PERSONAL ESTIMATE OF THE CHARACTER OF THE LATE EMPRESS DOWAGER, TZE-HSI

*By Katharine A. Carl, Painter of the Portrait of the Late
Empress Dowager*

I must first apologize for giving you but a gossip talk, reminiscent of the dynasty that has passed and not touching upon things of import to China of today. Though the object of this conference, to which Clarke University has convened us, is to bring us to a better knowledge and appreciation of the Chinese, while we thrill at the recital of the struggles of the young republic to make itself worthy, I think all who are interested in China of today, even the ardent young republicans themselves, cannot fail to find some interest, to feel some pride in the great Empress Tze-Hsi who so long presided over the destinies of China, who, Manchu as she was, loving her own and full of the prejudices of her race. I found a patriotic Chinese, really loving and fully conscious of her great responsibilities toward China, deeply imbued with the idea of China's integrity, her right to retain her national entity at all costs and her power to work out her own salvation.

I had the honor of painting her majesty's portraits and of living with her during the eleven months necessary for the work. I was, during this time, brought into the close and quasi-intimate association that generally exists between the painter and his sitter, however august, and I learned to admire the Empress Dowager sincerely. I found her a charming woman ever fascinating and elusive, a perfect hostess, always thoughtful and considerate, a witty conversationalist, a clever painter, a womanly woman full of intelligence and charm; besides admiring in her those qualities of statesmanship, that executive power which the world at large has acknowledged.

Interesting as she was from the artist's standpoint, with her well poised head, her flashing eye, her noble nose, her regal bearing enhanced by imperial vestments and splendid jewels: her character, her vivid personality soon charmed me more than her exterior, and psychologically she was as interesting a study as she was artistically.

As the first question I am invariably asked about my experience in China is "How did you come to paint the Empress Dowager's portrait?" I will leave the interesting personality of my august sitter for the moment, and begin by telling you all I know about this. I visited Peking a few days after my arrival in China and at a dinner my first evening there, a secretary of the French legation in Peking (whom I had known in Paris) from his place at table, some distance from mine, asked me if I was not going "to paint the portrait of the Empress Dowager while I was in Peking." I laughingly replied I was perfectly willing to do so, but feared "willingness" would not carry me far towards its accomplishment, that my ambition at that time had not soared higher than hoping to have the opportunity of *seeing* the great woman! He insisted that being a *woman* and a painter of some little reputation were "qualifications" and that it was not so improbable. He then appealed to Sir Robert Hart asking him if it were not "probable." Sir Robert seemed more annoyed than interested and put a stop to the conversation by saying, "Miss Carl has not come to China to paint anyone's portrait." Later in the evening when I was alone with him, Sir Robert referred to the conversation by saying. "It seems strange Monsieur ——— who has been in China ten years doesn't know Chinese emperors and empresses are never painted from life. After their deaths a more or less imaginary likeness from memory is made of them, but should the Empress Dowager set aside all traditions, as she is capable of doing, it would never be in favor of a foreigner." As he was so earnest about it I laughingly assured him I had no intention of taking Monsieur ——— *au sérieux*, that I should not pursue the Empress Dowager into the mysterious fastnesses of the forbidden city and demand to paint her portrait, nor should I even

attack the Foreign Office, backed by my government, and insist on painting her majesty or having an indemnity.

Four months later I was in Chefoo. There I received a letter from Mrs. Conger wife of our then minister to China. She wrote, "There is a question of the Empress Dowager having her portrait painted. Mr. Conger and I are very anxious to have it sent to the St. Louis Exposition. We should like to know, if it should be brought about, if you would be willing to come to Peking and undertake it." I hastened to assure Mrs. Conger not only of my "willingness" but of my great desire to do it. And immediately the memory of my first night in Peking and the dinner conversation recurred to me and I realized, from what Sir Robert had told me, how improbable such a thing was. While feeling duly grateful to Mr. and Mrs. Conger for their interest, I spoke of the letter to no one but my brother and soon put it out of my mind.

Five months later I was in Shanghai when I received a second letter from Mrs. Conger saying she thought the portrait was "imminent," that they expected word from the palace any day as to when it was to be begun. Needless to say I was amazed and overjoyed at the thought of the "impossible" becoming the probable, and in a few days I had the third letter from Mrs. Conger containing a copy of the official message her majesty had sent through the Wai-Wu-Pu to the American legation thus worded, "H. I. M. The Empress Dowager of Great China requests her Excellency Mrs. Conger to present the American artist at the palace on Friday August 5, for the purpose of painting her majesty's portrait."

On arrival in Peking I went to the American legation as guest of our Minister and Mrs. Conger. Soon after my arrival there the Empress Dowager's interpreters came to inquire on the part of her majesty if I had made a comfortable voyage and to hope that I was not too fatigued thereby to begin her majesty's portrait on the day I was to be presented. "The augurs and astrologers had naturally been consulted on so momentous an event as the painting of her majesty's first portrait and had found that the day on which

I was to be presented was a most auspicious day for beginning." I immediately agreed to begin on the "auspicious day," saying I would make a small sketch on that day. I was told her majesty did not wish a "small sketch" but "a very large portrait." I assured them that the small sketch would serve as a basis for as large a portrait as her majesty desired, but I found this could not be done; as, to carry out the instructions of the augurs and astrologers, the final large picture must be begun, if only by a line, on the day chosen! Thus not knowing anything of her majesty, whether she would require a wide or narrow canvas, I stretched one, three by six feet, and on the appointed day Mrs. Conger, her interpreter and myself, with all my paraphernalia, canvas, easel, charcoal and paints set out for the summer palace, sixteen miles from Peking.

On arrival at the gates a young official from the Wai-Wu-Pu (foreign office) came out to receive us. The foreign office has its own building at the gates of the summer palace as at the winter palace in Peking, for the Empress Dowager unlike European potentates, transacted business of state even when she was in villegiature. This young official, while assisting us to alight, told us her majesty was in a most gracious mood and had decided to give me "two sittings for the portrait" that I was to remain in the summer palace for the night and have a sitting the next day! Had I been able to begin by a preparatory small canvas, these two sittings would have delighted me, but two sittings for a canvas three feet by six was not encouraging! However, though I knew two sittings would be almost useless on such a canvas, I enjoyed the thought of being able to see the Great Empress and study her two days in succession.

The palace eunuchs awaited us in the court of the foreign office with the red palace chairs. We were soon seated in them and lifted from the ground and borne swiftly by the eunuch bearers through the outer gates of the palace, past beautiful yellow roofed buildings through wonderful flower-filled courts until we finally reached the largest of these last on the banks of the lake. Tall flag staffs painted in blue and white with the imperial pennants waving in the breeze, flanked

a white marble-stepped landing place. Growing shrubs and fragrant flowers filled this court, over which was stretched a silken awning. On the side opposite the lake, in front of a great yellow-tiled building with its roof's upturned corners supported by vermilion columns, our chairs were set down—the great plate glass doors, emblazoned with her majesty's favorite character in vermilion and gold, were thrown open and we entered the throne room.

A group of ladies stood waiting to receive us. The young Empress (wife of the Emperor) surrounded by the princesses of the blood and her majesty's interpreters (one German and three English and French). Neither the Empress Dowager nor the Emperor were present. The English and French interpreters were the Lady Yu Keng and her daughters; Yu Keng, a Manchu had been minister to France and there the daughters had learned French. While Lady Yu Keng spoke English. I was talking with them when I noticed a lull, and on looking around saw a young and charming looking person, who was so different from my preconceived idea of the Empress Dowager that I asked who it was. "Her majesty." She entered, followed by the Emperor, who looked young and shy. Mrs. Conger first paid her respects and immediately the Empress Dowager asked "Where is the artist," and I was brought up and began to make a reverence which she stopped by holding out her hands and saying "Ceremony is waived between artists," referring to herself as an artist which she was. After enquiring if I did not feel too tired to begin at the appointed time she withdrew to prepare herself for the sitting—as she had received us in quite simple dress. She soon returned clothed in all the splendour of her imperial attire, her hair dressed in Manchu fashion and bedecked with brilliant flowers and curious jewels, her face bright and animated, she was truly an interesting subject for an artist. She asked if there was any change I should like made in the disposition of the furniture and when I suggested that the Dragon Throne be moved nearer the great plate-glass doors (the only place where the light was good enough to work) the princesses and eunuchs looked as if the ceiling should fall upon my unworthy

head for such a suggestion but her majesty immediately ordered the throne moved, and when it was in place and my easel set up in front of it, she mounted the dais and said the hour for beginning was soon to sound and before she had finished speaking the eighty-six clocks in this throne-room began to strike the auspicious hour! Her majesty fixed her wonderful, penetrating eyes upon me and held up her hand for me to begin—and there I stood with the princesses in a row behind me and behind them a crowd of palace eunuchs, all watching me! I simply could not raise the charcoal to the canvas for a few seconds. I was ignominiously afraid; but I soon got some mastery over myself and began. It seemed to me I had drawn but a few moments when her majesty held up her hand and said the sitting was over. Aided by the princesses and eunuchs she descended from the dais and came to look at the portrait. I too looked at it; now with eyes that saw, and I realized how far I had fallen short of what I should have done. After looking at it for some time, though I am sure as fully conscious as myself of its shortcomings, she pronounced herself as satisfied with the beginning; and then turning to me said, “How would you like to stop in the palace and paint this at your leisure and my convenience?” I hastened to accept this most unexpected invitation and thus began my eleven months in the different palaces of the Empress Dowager, and my delightful experiences as a member of her household; not quite as a member of her household, for though I had a day domicile within the precincts, she installed me in the palace of the Emperor’s father near the summer palace. My domicile had beautiful grounds, numerous pavilions, lakes, summer houses and its own theater, she gave me a retinue of servants (three hundred, I learned later) also carts, horses, outriders; in short, entertained me in quite royal fashion.

What most impressed me at first in the Empress Dowager was her extreme simplicity. I had always thought of her as the central figure in a continuous pageant, as never laying aside formality, as always rigid in the traditions of her old and conservative court; and I found her simple, womanly, and human in the best sense, interested in all that surrounded

her, in nature, in people and in art. Her passion for flowers was extraordinary, and her dogs were great favorites, and she loved to amuse herself with them in her leisure moments. She was an early riser, and as all Chinese court functions are held before mid-day, she was early to bed as well. She rose at half past five and had her tea, then the young Empress and the ladies came and assisted at her levée. On entering her bedroom they knelt and said together the usual greeting, "Lao-tze-tseng chee-siang." "May the Holy mother be happy," and unless they were dismissed, all remained during her morning toilette which was the most elaborate of the day, as she dressed then for the audience or for any ceremony there happened to be. After the toilette was completed the Emperor came in and paid his respects. Then the two, in their imperial robes of state, went to the audience chamber followed by a large retinue of their respective attendants.

The audience hall was in another building, for the Chinese palaces, instead of being one great building as in Europe, consist of a number of pavilions divided by courts and connected by covered archways. The Emperor had his own pavilion and his own throne room quite apart from the Empress Dowager's in all the imperial palaces. The audience hall was in common. There they held their joint audiences. On their approach to the audience hall a band of Chinese musicians dressed in gala robes of red played a minor air on their curious instruments in the rhythm of a Gregorian chant. I called this the imperial hymn for it was always played when their majesties passed for a ceremony or to hold audience! The government in China under the Empress Dowager and the old régime was a complicated affair. Every Province had its own and every city a number of boards, and the heads of all these departments reported to their majesties' grand council at Peking several times a year, and their majesties received the members of the council or some officials everyday in audience. Audiences were held whether at the summer, sea, or winter palaces. I was, of course, never present in the hall while audience was being held. During the audience the young Empress and

the Princesses and ladies who had accompanied the Empress Dowager to the door, sat outside on the verandah, smoked cigarettes, and gossiped, and I sometimes made one of that frivolous throng. After the audience their majesties took their respective ways followed by their respective suites to their own quarters. On arrival in her throne room the Empress Dowager had her robes of state removed, her imperial head dress with its flowers and jewels was taken off and she was then clothed in a simple gown and her hair arranged quite simply, close to her head with a single flower or one jewelled ornament. After this she sat down to rest and talk with the ladies. Then she would pose an hour for her portrait. I painted the first portrait in her throne room where she sat when her meals were served and out of which opened her bedroom and boudoir. During these sittings for the portrait she would sip tea from time to time or eat candied fruits, and now and then smoke cigarettes held in a jewelled mouthpiece. After an hour's sitting she would tire and say we must rest and when I protested I was not tired and could easily go on for an hour she would insist that if she were tired sitting, doing nothing, I must be, standing and working, that if she needed rest, I did also. Thus for the first three months I was not allowed to work except when she could sit, as the Throne room where I had to paint was her sitting room. When the sitting was finished the eunuchs removed the "holy picture" as the portrait was called; my brushes and palette were taken away to be cleaned, my easel removed and the throne room resumed its usual aspect, save for the throne which kept the place near the door where I had asked to have it moved that first day, and the great yellow covered box which had been made, at the Empress Dowager's order, to hold my brushes, palette, oils, etc.

After the sitting the Empress Dowager sometimes took a walk before ordering the luncheon or "early rice." For this, a long table was set with its one cover at the end for her majesty, for she took it alone. The table was loaded with yellow dishes, filled with the different meats, fish, soups and vegetables, and covered with curiously chased pyramidal

silver covers which were removed by an army of eunuchs when her majesty took her seat at the head. The meal, though the table was so bountifully set, was soon finished, for though she had a normal appetite the Empress Dowager was not a great eater. After the meal her golden rince-bouche was brought, then a great silver basin with silken towels when she washed her hands.

After luncheon she took her siesta and was read to, when that was over there was a promenade through the grounds accompanied by the eunuchs bearing chairs, so that, if fatigued her majesty and the ladies could be carried over the rest of the ground. Sometimes she would be rowed on the lake in the imperial barge for the afternoon exercise. There was quite a fleet on the lake when she elected to go in her barge. This, with her throne chair covered with yellow, in the center of the raised platform, was drawn by two other boats of twenty-four standing rowers! The army of eunuchs who always accompanied the Empress Dowager and Emperor on their walks or when they went on the lake, stood in six or seven other boats which followed the imperial barge. She sat in her throne chair, the ladies sitting or reclining on cushions on the platform of the barge. When the Emperor elected to accompany her majesty, which he often did, he sat quite simply at her left on a cushion with no more ceremony than was accorded the ladies, the only difference being that his cushion was yellow, while the ladies had red ones. His and the Empress Dowager's chief eunuchs stood behind them on the barge. These often served tea or sweets while we were gliding over the waters of the lake. We sometimes landed at one of the landing places far from the throne room court, and the chairs met us and we were carried back. Sometimes the barge would be brought to the imperial landing place flanked by the great painted columns bearing the imperial pennants, and we would disembark in front of the throne room. On our return from the promenade Wahn Fahn or late rice was served in her majesty's throne room. This, the dinner, was no more elaborate than luncheon. It could not be! There was the same long table laden with the yellow porcelain silver-covered dishes, filled with the

same rare and tempting food. Bird's nest soup, shark's fins, preserved eggs, white shrimps, boneless capons and ducks, bamboo shoots, salads and all the wonderful dishes that make the Chinese menu the most *recherché* and elaborate in the world. It seemed a strange anomaly to call these repasts, worthy of Lucullus, by such simple names as early and late rice!

After dinner (rarely later than six o'clock) when her majesty made the sign, I bade her good-night and, accompanied by the Ladies Yu Keng and the eunuchs set aside for our service while in the palace, we were carried in our chairs to the outer gates, thence to our palace in our own carts and chairs.

The Empress Dowager was a great purist as to language. She had a fine musical ear and detected at once and deplored any misuse of words or misplacing of the tonic accent, so important in speaking Chinese. It was a beautiful language as spoken by her, with her silvery voice and clear intonation. She bemoaned the fact of so many dialects being spoken in China. Even Mandarin (official) Chinese is marred by the many and varied accents of the different provinces; some of which were very trying to the ears of the Empress Dowager. She longed to have one language for China, spoken as well as written, and she would have welcomed with delight the reform the Republic is instituting, in the unification of spoken Chinese.

Thinking my stay in the palace would be short I decided I would not try to learn Chinese as there were three good interpreters always ready to translate. The Empress Dowager, probably dreading another shock to her sensitive ear, did not encourage my learning. She said the foreigners studied it for a lifetime and then rarely spoke it well and it would be better if I tried Manchu as that was more analogous to a European language as it has an alphabet. But after I had learned a few phrases of greeting in Chinese with an accent not too offensive she thought I might try to learn it and asked if the foreigners had not some simple books for beginners, I got two. One compiled by the missionaries for the use of novices for household needs; naturally

expressed in anything but court-language, this was the first I gave her majesty to look at, she turned the first few pages slowly and then more and more quickly, and finally hurled it from her saying, "It was impossible, I mustn't touch it." Then she looked at Giles' book for beginners in Chinese and though this did not meet her approval she decided I might study that, but said the young Empress would teach me to "speak properly." My efforts were a source of amusement to the princesses and even the eunuchs, and the ladies did not hesitate to burst into merry peals of laughter at my mistakes; all but the graciously-sweet young Empress. Even the Empress Dowager would sometimes share the general hilarity, for her sense of humor was strong, but she would soon check herself and the others by saying Chinese was so difficult that very few of the princesses spoke it properly as I would see when I learned more!

So simple is the construction of spoken Chinese I soon learned enough to understand what was said to me. When the Empress Dowager spoke it was so slowly and clearly her words being supplemented by eloquent gesture, I soon understood all she said. I have already alluded to her great love of flowers and this was not confined only to flowers, but to plants and the bettering of certain species. This was the same with her dogs, she was very careful about their breeding.

When her eyes were stronger she had embroidered a great deal, she drew and painted and was a famous writer of the great characters. She did not disdain to interest herself in humbler duties, and she overlooked the smallest details of the imperial household. One day when she expected to receive some ladies of the legation and the throne room had been arranged for their reception, and her majesty and the princesses were already assembled, she, like some careful New England housewife, looking around to see that all was "proper" noticed some dust upon a piece of furniture and promptly ordered a silken cloth brought to her, with which she herself proceeded to dust, not only that piece but several others saying, "the best way to have a thing done well is to do it oneself!" No one despises labor in China. There it has a dignity of its own.

Agriculture, one of the most important features of Chinese industry, has its own temple where the Emperor himself officiates. In the early spring of every year his celestial majesty himself plowed the first furrow of the year! It was one of the great court ceremonies! The plough drawn by an ox kept in the palace grounds whose toil of the year was confined to this imperial furrow, with the Emperor dressed in his robes of state between the handles of the plough guiding it with all seriousness and seeing that the furrow was straight and properly deep. The imperial princes and highest officials of China clothed in their official robes following his majesty's footsteps! And I can say I never saw the Emperor more interested than the day I accidentally saw this ceremony, which takes place in the palace park the day before the public ploughing in the grounds of the temple of agriculture! This ploughing by the Emperor was to show the agriculturists of China the nobility of their work, great enough for the Son of Heaven himself to perform! The manufacture of silk, the rearing of the cocoons is another great industry of China, and the title of Guardian of the Cocoons was a coveted honor, bestowed only upon the princesses of the imperial clan. Singing and dancing which we indulge in for our own amusement is relegated in China, to a class who do nothing else. The Empress Dowager having received a new grand piano while I was in the palace had me and the Misses Yu Keng try it for her one day, and when I played a waltz she asked to see it danced. When the Misses Yu Keng danced it and she found it was a regular practice among the Europeans, to do their own dancing she wondered why they couldn't get dancers to do it for them!

Music is a part of most of the great ceremonies in China, and they enjoy the singing of actresses and musicians, but well bred people consider it undignified to sing, however, musical they may be. One glorious afternoon when we were out in the barge, drawn by the two boats of rowers, over the lake, all abloom with gorgeous pink lotus, past beautiful bridges and the quaintly carved marble quays, the radiance of the setting sun glinting with added gold the upturned yellow roofs on the shore, the Empress Dowager

sat drinking in the beauty of the scene; and then, to the soft accompaniment of the rippling water and the swish of the oars against the lotus leaves, she began to sing, in a low, but perfectly placed voice, a soft minor song so charmingly and with such artistic grace, I could not help murmuring "beautiful" in Chinese, she started and said, "I forgot myself. It is most unbecoming for an Empress of China to sing," and placing her hand upon my hair with one of her graceful half-caressing gestures she continued. "*Never* mention my singing to any one, if the Shanghai papers knew it there would be a pretty row."

Eight months later we were again at the summer palace. One lovely evening in the late spring, again floating in the imperial barge on the lake—I was sitting near the empress Dowager as before, and I dared ask her to sing again, and she did! the same sweet minor song, like some sweet crooning lullaby! It was charming.

The too generally accepted idea that the Empress Dowager was of mean origin is now, thanks to the larger knowledge we have of things Chinese, quite exploded. She was descended in direct line from Nur-ha-chu the great warrior prince, whose splendid strategic feats led to the conquest of China and the founding of the Manchu dynasty. There were three other Empresses Dowager in her family. Her cousin was the first wife of Hsien-Fong of whom the late Empress Dowager became the fifth wife. She belonged to the powerful White banner clan.

When I was in the palace I heard of an old Manchu prophecy dating from the conquest of China, that when "one of the White banner-clan attained to imperial power in China it would be the end dynasty." Strange to say the late Empress Dowager, the first of the White banner to wield imperial power, *was* virtually the last of the dynasty! I have often thought of this prophecy during the past year.

As I have said before, the Empress Dowager seemed to me really a Chinese patriot, she loved China as did few of the Chinese themselves, with a real devotion. I used to say when I was in the palace, before Chinese patriotism had been fully awakened, that she was the only Chinese patriot

I had met! She believed in China, she cherished the noble deeds of the rulers of all its other dynasties, she gloried in China's accomplishments in the past, she longed to bring back its brilliant epochs. She was profoundly discouraged at her powerlessness to check the inroads of the foreigners, at her inability to infuse new life and greater effort into the Manchus. She hoped by inaugurating a representative government to increase China's power, to put new life into the governing element, to check the gangrene of official greed which was sapping the life of the government.

Though she would have fought to the last to retain her power and assure the supremacy of her clan for the future, I believe, had she lived to see this pacific revolution, the noble generosity of the republicans to the imperial family, the more than justice they have shown the Manchus in general; if she could have felt, as I firmly believe her broad mind and real patriotism was capable of feeling, that the republic, brought about by this extraordinary revolution was what China needed to shake her from her long lethargy; I think the Empress Dowager would have accepted it as a happy solution of the great problem of keeping China's entity intact, and establishing a nation united and strong.

However, *I* cannot but rejoice that she was borne aloft in the Dragon chariot before the revolution was accomplished!